

Frances Banks - Mystic and Educator: The Visionary Solipsist

Garth Mason

Abstract

This paper focuses on Frances Banks' spiritual life and her education career which has significance for the embellishment of both the historical landscapes in spirituality and progressive educational thought in South Africa. It argues three points: first; Frances Banks is an important figure in the history of South African spirituality and education; second her struggles with patriarchal authority have important repercussions for gender studies. Third, her leaving the Community of the Resurrection has implications for an understanding of orthodox spirituality

Keywords: Frances Banks, mysticism, holistic education, inclusive education, Religious Instruction, Christian education, Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Instruction, spirituality

Introduction

Frances Banks is today a mysterious and largely unknown figure in South African educational and spiritual history. Yet she had an important impact on both the historical landscapes in spirituality and progressive educational thought in South Africa. In this article I explore the development of Frances Banks' mystical thought and its influence on her educational writing as well as her twin roles as Principal of the Grahamstown Teacher Training College and Head of the Southern African Teachers' Association, culminating in her contribution to the rewriting of the Cape High School Syllabus for Religious

Instruction in 1944. In order to understand Banks' relationship to Religious Instruction in the Cape, my article focuses on her personal emotional, spiritual and psychological journey as a woman to give expression to her spiritual beliefs within orthodox religious and educational practice. There are four facets which contribute to the mystical influence on her educational thoughts. These are her reading of mystical literature, personal mystical experiences dating from early childhood into middle age, her decision to study education as a means to ensure her status as an independent woman separate from her father's agnosticism, then later, her study of child psychology and, paradoxically, her decision to enter the Community of the Resurrection Order in Grahamstown¹. The four aspects coalesced into a struggle between her orthodox religious practice as an Anglican nun as a member of the Community of the Resurrection and her dynamic spiritual life. The conflict was expressed in an irrefragable paradox - the closer she moved to renouncing her vows, the more she invested in her mystical experiences. Her growing realization of the primacy of mystical experience led her to place the latter at the centre of educational writing and curriculum development and yet her progressive educational thought suffered due her inability to move away from a confessional approach in her religious educational writings.

I aver that Banks' mysticism was a specifically English brand of mysticism, derived from the *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1927), which she read copiously in her childhood and adolescence. This text, together with her reading of Victorian mystical literature, added to her appreciation of her spiritual mentors in England prior to leaving for South Africa. The female family figures in her youth who portrayed spirituality and missionary engagement with social inequalities also played a significant role in her spiritual development. All these spiritual influences informed the influence of her mysticism into her educational epistemology.

In contrast to her spiritual influences her father's agnosticism and Darwinism ruled her childhood home. Church attendance was discouraged besides weddings and funerals. As a consequence, her yearning mystical

¹ Banks' research into mysticism intensified in her middle to old age, after she left education. These writings therefore do not form part of the present research and will be explored in depth in a later article.

spirituality soon came into conflict with the forces of authority in her life. Authority, in the form of patriarchy, influenced her choice to study education and her choice to leave England for the Eastern Cape, thereby loosening the psychological hold of her father's agnosticism and affording her independence from his influence over her.

Her relationship with authority remained ambivalent. She had left her father's patronage and intellectual influence to enter the Community of the Resurrection Order, but this move in itself suggests a need to submit to a practical and spiritual social hierarchy. It was eventually supplanted by an all-absorbing interest in psychic mysticism when she left the Order in the late 1950s. But it is worthwhile posing the question why did Banks elect to become a nun if it did entail submitting to the practices and oaths of the Order, and significantly to the ultimate leadership of the male Bishop? Such a context does not offer the space for a woman to find her own spiritual voice².

Frances Banks is a distinctive educational figure who is worthy of consideration in that she did not slip totally into the clichéd thought-patterns of her day and, I will argue, her writings have relevance for curriculum design and education methodology today as marking a forgotten stage in the development of holistic and inclusive education in South Africa. This study also demonstrates the way educators' personal beliefs impact on teaching as implied by James' radical empiricism. This paper will show that Banks' personal spiritual struggles are reflected in her educational writing. Some aspects of her personal mystical journey add depth and dimension to her educational writing, whereas other personal influences collapse due to the incompatibility of her mystical ideas with Biblical and Christian orthodox education. Despite Banks' avowal that she accepted the theosophical writings of Alice Bailey (1962: 41), she could never fully embrace the theosophical belief in the truth of all religions. Her mysticism was a form of nature mysticism, akin to Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the Cosmic Christ (1955: 291). Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, it was shot through with contradictions.

² Significantly Banks choose not to join a contemplative order either in the Catholic or the Anglican traditions because certain speculative and alternative knowledge would be barred to her as a woman (1962: 15).

Theoretical Paradigm

William James' theory of radical empiricism provides a useful lens through which to read Banks' writings. For James, subjective and objective facets of experience are seen as related contexts of 'pure experience'. He does not perceive any dualism between subject and object³. All experiences, therefore, including mystical experiences, form part of human experience and contribute to personal identity, in addition to the meaning and sense made of observable reality. Banks' mystical approach to her educational writings is illuminated when read in the light of James' radical empiricism (2003:3). Banks' mystical experience forms part of her human experience, which informs and contributes to her sense of an observable reality because it falls into the same category as observable reality in that it is all part of her experience. I argue that, in Banks' mystical experience, the specific quality of interiority provided the psychological impetus for release from authoritative religious structures. Her mystical experiences tended to empty the orthodox formulaic religious rituals and instruction of substance. It also introduced a significant element of self-criticism, self-reflexivity and social awareness into her writing. A negative consequence of her mysticism was that it ensconced her in a form of spiritual solipsism, so that, while it released her into the spiritual freedom she sought, this was achieved at a high personal and social cost.

In terms of James' hermeneutic of pragmatic empiricism,

real presence ... from which all our theoretical constructions are derived, and to which they must all return and reconnect themselves ... that real presence ... is homogenous, and not merely homogenous, but also numerically one, with a certain part of our inner life (2003: 112).

According to James' framework, the mystical experience needs to be placed in the context of her expatriation to South Africa and the significant relationship she shared with her unnamed friend. Banks' mysticism resonates

³ William James, in his lecture 'The Notion of Consciousness' (1906/ 1907), referred to the term 'pure experience' which seems to overcome the mistaken inference that James is referring to a substantial monism (2003: 119).

noticeably with Virginia Woolf's essay, 'A room of one's own'. Woolf argues in this essay that the observing mind is undivided. The effort the mind takes to separate the world into categories is opposed to its natural state (Woolf 2013: ebook location 1410). I will explore Woolf's exploration of feminine identity in relation to Bank's spiritual exploration. The difference between Banks' and Woolf's struggle to find feminine identity is that Banks wanted to discover the relationship between her femininity and her spirituality, whereas in 'A room of one's own' Woolf explores the relationship between women and fiction apart from male elitism (Roe 1990: 82). Like Banks, it takes a mystical moment for the narrator in 'A room of one's own' – in this case the falling of a leaf, to enter the new order of things where all is infused by peace (1990: 83). In the essay the narrator discovers an androgynous writer's voice within a sequestered private space (1990: 83). For Banks, her desire for equitable human relations led to her partly sequestered life of service as a nun, but the significant friendship that began in Banks' mid-life provided the catalyst for her to explore her deepest spiritual impulses.

The Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus carries the imprint of Banks' preference for inner spirituality and the corresponding greater importance of deeper spirituality over external religious creed and form. Paradoxically, though, the Syllabus never succeeds in extending its reach beyond the Christian faith. This is an unexplained aspect of Banks's thought in the light of the fact that she elected to move away from orthodox Christian belief. It remains a point of speculation whether she left the Order because she realized the incongruity of working within orthodox Christianity when orthodox belief and practice held little value. But if she actually believed that Christian education held value in the broad curriculum, this points to an inherent contradiction in her thinking, rather than explaining why she left the Order.

Frances Banks: An Historical Outline

Frances Banks was born in 1895 into a middle-class family of five in England, where she was the third born. Her memories of her family from her pre-school days are that 'our chief distinction ... was my father's agnosticism which in those days bore some risk of social ostracism' (1962: 5). She

identifies the basis of his rejection of Christianity as the incompatibility of Darwinian Theory with the ‘acceptance of *Genesis* as literal truth’ (1962:5, italics in original). Banks also experienced a tension in her life between dogma and sensory experience – one which she resolved in a radically different way from her father’s agnosticism, by resorting to psychically grounded mysticism⁴.

The agnosticism that gathered around her childhood home cast a repressive pall of silence around issues of spirituality, which extended to her experience of spiritually barren Biblical Studies at day-school. If it had not been for her father’s sister, an evangelical missionary, her mother’s ‘gently devout’ sister ‘and her clergyman cousin in the habit of breaking a journey with us several times a year and loading us with missionary literature’ she may have struggled to sustain her interest in spirituality, combined with the desire to apply her spiritual beliefs to social issues (1962: 5). Her oppressive experience in her home is acutely captured in the following description of a recurrent nightmare:

The scene of the dream was always the same formless situation. Across my entire visual field there poured down a forceful rain of power beams beneath which I crouched alone, seeking to escape; but there was no way out, for those piercing beams filled all the space there was. As their downpour increased, I ran hither and thither at the bottom of one vast field of force, until, expecting instant annihilation, I awoke in a cold sweat screaming (1962: 6).

⁴ I have not been able to find any primary material on Frances Banks’ life. The sources that do exist are her autobiography, *Frontiers of Revelation* (1962) and her educational writings which include transcripts for radio, essays, notes on the 1944 Agreed Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus and her MA dissertation. A full biographical sketch of Banks’ life is beyond the scope of this article but will be researched in future articles. The existing historical data on her life is sketchy but offers rich material on her psychological and spiritual development. The outline of her life provided here is a result of inferences drawn from her own autobiographical writings.

When Frances and her sister left their home to attend boarding school in Southport, Frances, for the first time, experienced a deeper inner spirituality. She and her sister, boldly transgressing their father's wishes, secretly registered for Confirmation class and the Rector, whom Banks describes 'as an unusually spiritual man', introduced, as part of his class, conducted meditations in addition to direction for private meditation (1962: 6). During the Confirmation ceremony she experienced her first mystical experience of a 'great force descending upon me with over-powering intensity' (1962: 6). After school she worked as a young woman amongst poor dockyard communities in Liverpool and Portsmouth (1943: 17; 1962: 11) and this gave her a compassionate understanding of the inequities and hardships of disempowered people and ensured that, when she undertook her work in South Africa, she was no longer an ingénue. These combined experiences of spirituality and social injustice initiated her lifelong enquiry into both mysticism and social engagement.

Frances Banks worked in the Training College in Grahamstown for 25 years and was the Principal of the College for fourteen years. She focused on religious education and psychology, obtaining her Masters degree in the latter. During that time she increasingly experienced the strictures of the Order's life as inhibiting her spiritual growth. She did, however, find some relief in the time allotted to retreats in prayer and meditation away from her community responsibilities. During one significant retreat with a close friend she writes of witnessing her friend in her etheric body (1962: 27). This experience caused her to undergo a profound personal spiritual transformation, which involved establishing an inner centre of meaning in her life in a religious context that was becoming increasingly barren. At the time of undergoing her spiritual transformation and drafting the Cape Syllabus in Religious Instruction she was deciding to give up her vows as a nun in order to explore what she termed 'esoteric' Christianity (1962: 44). The deep reflexivity and probing of her own inner depths is reflected in the Syllabus, which invites reflexivity on the meaning of life in universal terms and the nature of the good in society and the world. The experience affected her so profoundly that it significantly influenced her teacher training and involvement in curriculum design in the Cape Province. As a direct result, she was moved to provide a spiritual map for young people entering what she perceived as a materialistically-dominated world. During the latter years at

the College she visited alternative spiritual groups and meetings in Johannesburg as her interest in alternative spirituality grew (1962: 34).

In the late 1950s, South Africa's growing entrenchment of racial animus led Banks to abominate the regressive policies of the Nationalist government when Europe was moving towards recognition of universal human rights and she was impelled to leave South Africa and return to England (1962: 50). There she continued to pursue her ideas of holistic education and the possibility of transformation through a soul-based education. She developed an English education curriculum for prison inmates (Banks 1958) and then she devoted nine years to developing the Institute of Psychic Christian research. She died in 1967 (1962: 52).

I contend that Banks' decision to enter a religious community as a nun was motivated by her need for equitable relations with people irrespective of social and economic rank. She felt a mystically-based conviction that the soul of a person was deeper than any ephemeral transitory personality. Her soul-based value system emerged from her early reading about the immortality of the soul in certain key texts. Chief among these are Sir Oliver Lodge's books concerning the afterlife and the immortality of the soul; articles in the Sunday papers by Reverend Vale Owens recording messages from his deceased wife; mystical poetry, by Francis Thompson, in particular; and the classic *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1962: 7). The common themes that run through these texts and Banks' mysticism concern the etheric realm that lies behind the veil of our senses and the reality of the soul's immortal existence. Banks was strongly influenced by English mystic poets, in particular Francis Thompson, and she could recite his long poem *The Hound of Heaven* from memory. The poem concerns the inevitability of the spiritual path; the relief of finding a spiritual home; the idea of God as a divine lover and God's desire for fellowship with people. The poem speaks of the purity of the soul veiled by earthly mortality:

I dimly guessed what Time in mists confounds;
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlement of Eternity;
Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
Round the half-glimpsèd turrets slowly washed again. But
ere him who summoneth

I first have seen, enwound
With glooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned;
His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.
Whether man's heart or life it be which yields
Thee harvest, must Thy harvest-fields
Be dinged with rotten death?
(1965: 16)

Banks felt strongly how the soul was constricted in fuliginous earthly form, even when she decided to follow a spiritual life in a religious community. In the days before her ordination she experienced severe doubts concerning her decision. This doubt increased over the years of her involvement with the Community of the Resurrection Order as her ambivalence towards the strictures of belief grew. Yet she followed the guidance of the Order for 25 years, and accepted its rules and regulations (1962: 17). Despite her diligence and self-sacrifice, she felt bereft and spiritually exhausted. In the later years of her membership of the Order, when she was Principal of the Teacher Training College, she befriended an unnamed visiting lecturer and started reading alternative spiritual literature. This literature and new friendship provided her with inner strength and stability. Her search for inner spiritual strength and guidance had already led her to adapt her beliefs to the Biblical Education currency of the day in her contribution to the Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Instruction. At the same time, it led logically to her renouncing her vows, thus breaking her link to the Order and to conventional Christianity.

Associated with her mystical reading she describes, during her teacher training in Oxford, an incorporeal vision of light, power, love, amazing joy and lack of self-identity that 'poured out into over whelming currents of intense energy' (1962: 10) . She describes similar experiences 'of powerful descending force with overpowering intensity' after making her decision to enter the Community of the Resurrection Order (1962: 13). These non-physical experiences seemed, in her understanding, to relate to her soul's journey and the life choices she was making to assist its development. Most significantly, they informed her decision not to follow a monastic life but, rather, to serve society through education.

Banks' Writings

Banks' writings are divided into three discrete categories: her South African writing, her English writings and 'channelled writings'. Although these three are distinct in content, there are definite thematic similarities that run through the texts – her emphasis on personal spiritual growth, her recognition of the whole person in terms of soul identity and her emphasis on inclusivity through acceptance of difference and the value of shared learning in groups. The most important decision I faced was whether to include the channelled writings as recorded by Helen Greaves (1969). There is enough consistency in the texts to warrant inclusion of all three categories in the research, but limitations of space dictate that the exploration of the channelled writings will take place in a later article. I do not presume a continuous consciousness throughout the three categories of texts. But the channelled texts do manifest a degree of consistency of themes and concepts with those written before Banks' death. I read Banks, then, primarily as a mystical woman educator, with a view to uncovering her role in the historical development of thinking about holistic and inclusive education in South Africa. Her writings express both her own struggles and the contours of a particular historical phase in South African educational writing. An area of particular interest is the tension in her writing between its highly progressive nature and its residual conservatism.

Description and Analysis of Banks' Mystical Experiences

Banks' mystical experiences played a significant role in giving her life purpose and direction. By drawing on James' radical empiricism, which I outlined previously, this section will focus on the development of her mystical thinking and the following sections will relate her mystical thought to her educational thought.

Banks' mysticism is atypical of mystical traditions, which focus on sequestered meditative activity, such as St. Teresa's 'Interior Castle' (2007) or the *Visuddhimagga*, which describe progressive stages of mystical realization. All her mystical experiences convey similar characteristics of impersonality and formlessness, but, as she grew older, the harshness of the mystical experience was replaced by love, inspiration and refreshment.

During her Confirmation in adolescence she describes an impersonal spiritual experience:

There was some power, call it God, or call it Holy Spirit. But I knew no more of its nature; there was no form, content or vision, no light or sweetness; only a stark *force* which took possession of my being, entering as it were, through the crown of the head with shattering impetus (1962: 7).

By contrast, a mystical experience in her mid-life in retreat in Grahamstown is described as,

Formless and unemotional, inspiring and immeasurably refreshing. It had a crystalline spiritual quality, unlike the heavy-laden down-pour of the early days (1962: 27).

Her mystical experiences provided guidance for her spiritual development and left an indelible imprint on her memory. Though she ruminates on the role of imagination in interpreting these experiences, she does not entertain the possibility of their speciousness (1962: 29). Nevertheless there is a noticeable correlation between her life experiences and the nature of the mystical experiences she describes. This is seen in her reading of Rudolph Otto's 'Holy Other', which resonates with her sense of a separate presence in mystical experiences. Most notably, when sitting on the Religious Instruction Syllabus Committee, she felt the presence of an invisible being beside her (1962: 25). In Grahamstown she borrowed mystical literature from a visiting lecturer, including a book entitled *God is my Adventure*, which contained a collection of chapters on various spiritual writers, including Krishnamurti and Rudolf Steiner. As I mentioned previously, during a retreat with the visiting lecturer, she witnessed her in an 'etheric vision' (1962: 27 and 28). On another occasion, after reading about the akasic records, she saw a vision of herself in ancient Egypt and, on yet another occasion, after reading Ramacharaka's *Light of the path*, she describes an illuminating glow that lit the path back to their rondavel while on holiday on the Transkei coast (1962: 29).

Banks' Educational Career

Banks' educational thinking can be divided into three categories: Inclusive education, holistic education and Christian education. These three categories are clearly demarcated in her writing, but Christian education is the weakest area. In the following section I will describe her work in terms of these three categories and then show the inconsistencies that occur in her thinking about Christian education in relation to the other two categories.

Inclusive Education

Banks worked as a social worker in the Portsmouth docks in 1922 in her early twenties (Banks 1962:11). Her experience of working with impoverished families, dependent on the declining shipping economy, led her to conclude that there could be no 'genuine human relationship' where property and differential standards of living act as barriers. Based on this painful experience she resolved to enter a religious community that would afford her the possibility of giving up a salary and possessions. Her desire to found her human experience on genuine human relationships was profoundly influenced by the egalitarian Sermon on the Mount model for society (Banks 1943: 17).

She interpreted the Sermon on Mount ethic educationally in terms of the principle of freedom that placed the student at the centre of the learning process (1943: 19). Children, she maintained, must be encouraged to be themselves and be accepted as such and teachers needed to 'release (themselves) from egocentricism (materialistic view of the self) and see self as a temporary instrument of permanent significance' Banks, 1943: 28). Anti-social behaviour should be sublimated through creative activity rather than repressed. The consistency in her thinking on this point is apparent in her 1936 publication of her MA thesis where she argues that 'writing on toilet doors should be sternly rebuked' but that a suitable time and place should be used to communicate with offenders so that the issue can be humanely investigated (1936: 145). Teachers should endeavour to 'teach the whole person, not in spite of it' (1943: 31). Banks offers a perspective on inclusive education that is often neglected in the contemporary South African understanding of holistic education, which stresses that the whole child must

be developed, academically, culturally and physically. Banks contends that development of the whole person implies undivided or spiritual connectedness between self and other, expressed in the values of justice, caring, creativity and compassion. Banks lectured on her new philosophies in education as the Head of the South African Teachers' Association all over South Africa and in the then two Rhodesias (1962: 24).

In terms of learning being a shared experience based on acceptance and inclusivity, she espoused a visionary classroom methodology. As early as 1943 she advocated movable desks in classrooms and students working in groups comprising stronger and weaker students⁵. She argued that group dynamics in the classroom would lay the incentives for democracy in the larger society because they would lead students to learn consideration for others and lower the focus on self-centeredness (1943: 31-32).

Her child-centred learning focus is echoed in some forms of contemporary inclusive education theory. For example, Thomas and Loxley write that the central problem in understanding child behaviour is the 'sub-text that the real causes of difficult behaviour lie in deficit and deviance in the child' (2001: 49). By contrast, inclusive education reframes the question of needs by 'asking whose needs are being served - the school's needs or the child's needs?' (2001: 54). Rather than labelling students as successful and unsuccessful in the school system inclusive education encourages the employment of terms such as different and diverse intelligences (2001: 78).

Holistic Education

Banks' revolutionary approach to education is also displayed in her focus on holism. Her concept of holistic education was founded on the sublime verities of beauty, truth and goodness, which, she maintained, were deep requirements for the psyche. She maintained that social values had lost touch with the deeper structures of the human psyche and that along with Christianity the 'psyche needed to be rescued from private life'. All learning

⁵ She was greatly influenced by the group techniques for spiritual development used by the Moral Rearmament group who visited the College and with whom she continued correspondence (1962: 23).

should be based on the need of the psyche for these three eternal values (1943: 10).

In terms of beauty, the whole person needed to be educated and this could be achieved through experiencing the spirit via creative and self-reflective activities, such as recording dreams and meaningful experiences. She also advocated employing nature mysticism through asking students to describe a nature experience (1943: 46).

The search for truth should also be evoked in the student; but here it is important to realize that Banks railed against the idea of relative truth. Rather, for her, truth had to be applicable to the lived experience, not merely confined to book knowledge. Truth as a lived experience should emphasise the thinking process over the final product of thought (1943: 52-54). She writes:

We must, then, lead our pupils on a genuine acquisition of relevant knowledge, and follow up with a great cutting away of the dead wood of useless lumber, in every subject on the curriculum from Arithmetic onwards, making all acquisitions fit for their developing experience ... of the young (1946: 54).

For Banks moral consciousness cannot be separated from truth. Goodness is related to the powerful influence of the Sermon on the Mount on her praxis. She believed that modern Christianity had 'lost touch with the deeper structures of the human psyche', being consigned to formulaic social utterances on morality. By contrast, she believed that Christianity needed to be employed to grapple with the abstract concepts of goodness, truth and beauty in daily life (Banks 1943: 55 - 56).

Banks' thought resonates with contemporary thinking in terms of holistic education. Johnson and Neagley write,

(The) heart and spirit are deeply intertwined with mind and intellect and that education is most effective when it is based on a holistic understanding of human development, learning and education. Over the last decades, body of scientific literature has emerged that suggests that all learning is rooted in emotion, that emotion 'drives' both attention and rationally thinking. Without

emotional connections, education becomes dry and meaningless. Human beings are most adept at learning remembering facts and concepts that are personally meaning full to them (2011: xxi).

Emotionally based education, for them, is understood as encapsulating intuitive and spiritual dimensions of the human psyche into the learning program (2011: xix).

Christian Education

Banks maintains that an inclusive and holistic education must be based in Christian education (1943: 57 and 61). Whereas her ideas concerning inclusive and holistic education were significantly advanced for her time, she was unable to provide a convincing argument for why Christian education should be central to this endeavour. Her Sermon on the Mount ethic, where she argues that ‘life should be lived in acknowledgement of all (people)’ (1943: 2) is salutary, but she is unable to show why linking with spirit must be done through teaching Biblical Studies. She contends that Christianity should be taught like any other subject and that, like other subjects, it requires study and practice (1943: 61). She opposes the idea that religion should be taught on a phenomenological basis, allowing students to decide for themselves which religion or faith to follow, because this was not the manner in which other subjects were taught. She did, however, concede that teaching other religions and faiths is applicable in the higher grades but only within a framework of ‘progressive faith towards Christianity’ (Banks 1943: 71).

In insisting on the centrality of Christian Education for inclusive and holistic education, Banks contradicts the central tenets of her educational thought; the principle of freedom which allows students to discover their own identity, her sense that truth should be applicable to individual daily experience and not extrinsically focused on texts (1943: 26 and 52). All the same, she contributed to the design of the Agreed Religious Instruction syllabus for the Cape Province as a member of the Committee for Religious Instruction for schools in the Cape Province by including reflexive existential and social issues regarding suffering. But, in providing a Christian framework to answer these questions, the principles of student-centeredness

and freedom must be attenuated. This prejudice for Christian education reveals a narrow conservatism that is incongruous with her enlightened educational ideas. A good example of her prejudice for Christian Education is seen in her puritanical and, for the day, conventional criticism of the perfectly valid choice of agnosticism.

Agnosticism ... caused by theft, dishonesty, misdemeanours such as masturbation or malicious action in quite early childhood (1946: 88).

Her attitude towards agnosticism seems to require psychological analysis. In the light of Banks' childhood experience of her father's agnosticism and the resultant repression of spirituality in her childhood home, her condemnation above may express her unresolved resentment of her father's decision. Her uncharacteristic remarks regarding agnosticism in terms of her views on acceptance and inclusivity may also be read in the light of her awareness of the conservative audience for which she was writing, although this is less likely since her writing on inclusive education and holistic education do not evince the same degree of audience sensitivity.

Banks' Mystical Influence in her Curriculum Development in Religious Education

As in Banks' general educational writing, her mystical influences are also apparent in the Religious Educational writing. For Banks the Agreed Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus (it was an agreed Syllabus because the Cape Churches approved it) needed to enhance the developing spirituality of the pupil (1943: 3). Religious education had to address the soul's search to find meaning. It therefore had to be age-appropriate and expressed in the idiom of children (1943: 26 and 1946: iii). Its content needed to develop 'right thinking that would lead to constructive living' (1946: iii). Although she was theistic, Banks believed the Syllabus should be relevant to all faiths and denominations by discussing the concrete problems of human relationships and the ethics of spiritual education (1946: iii). In addition teachers needed to engage in critical reflection on their own belief and emphasise

the greater importance of becoming than of knowing, and of that inner development which opens the channels of awareness, creates right attitude, and gives meaning and purpose to life which can overcome circumstances and stand independent of exterior aids (1946: iii).

She sought to investigate the principles of religious education along the lines of perennial wisdom (1946: iv). Religious education, she argued, has been compartmentalized into a ‘corporate expression in the body politic’, resulting in religion being limited to codes of behaviour and agreed formulae compliant with the state (1946: 4).

Banks asserts that children are ‘live and growing beings’ (1946: 4). Therefore the knowledge they are taught must hold meaning both for them and for their growing contexts. It must neither be esoteric nor formulaic to the point of being ‘dead language’ to them (1946:4). This sentiment prefigures the work of Senge, Lucas; Smith; Dutton and Kleiner (2000: 20) on contextual knowledge and learning. They write:

Fields of knowledge do not exist separately from each other, nor do they exist separately from the people who study them. Knowledge and learning – the processes by which people create knowledge – are living systems made up of often indivisible networks and interrelationships.

Banks’ predominantly English mystical influence of how inner spirit conspires with the spirit inherent in nature underpins the task she set for student teachers to write prose about the observations of nature (1943: 47). This had the effect of creating immediacy within learning and enhancing learners’ awareness of their own context and state of mind.

As mentioned earlier, as a young adult Banks could recite *The Hound of Heaven* and the following lines of the poem could have influenced her methodological approach.

“your delicate fellowship;
Let me greet you lip to lip,
Let me twine you caresses,

Wantoning
With our lady's Mother's vagrant tresses,
Banqueting
With her in her mind-walled palace,
Underneath her azured daïs,
Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
From a chalice
Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring

So it was done:
I in their delicate fellowship was one –
Drew the bolt of nature's secrecies.

I knew all the swift importings
On the wilful face of skies;
I knew how the clouds arise
Spumèd of the wild sea-snorings;
All that's born dies
Rose and drooped with; made them shapers
Of mine own moods or wailful or divine;
With them joyed and was bereaven (1965: 13).

The strong influence of romantic poetry, replete with nature mysticism, panentheism and a sense of the divine residing in nature resonates through these lines. In Banks' writings, a similar English nature mysticism is noticeable. Here she describes an idea for lesson using nature poetry,

But if, for example, the idea of the transitoriness of beauty had arisen and been duly discussed, with its laments, consolations and so on, pupils could be set to pursue the idea by bringing poems on the subject ..., and explaining their meaning and probably after a while there would not be too high a proportion of 'Daffodils'! Similarly with love and love-lyrics, and many other subjects which link the child with the thoughts and aspirations of mankind throughout the ages (1943: 52).

Quotes like the above from her book, *Towards a Christian Society* (1943), reveal the tension between her developing inner mystical spirituality and the formal aspect of her social position as a nun and Christian

educationalist. In the book she attempts to find a position where her mysticism can coexist with orthodox Christianity. But try as she might to adapt her mysticism to Christian education, the book's concluding chapters on 'Rearing Christians' and 'Christian collectivism' struggle to contain her developing view of education based on mysticism in that she is unable to bring her acceptance of difference and diversity into religious thought to the extent that she achieves in her general educational writing.

The Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Instruction

The Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Instruction deserves attention because it is a complex document with certain noteworthy innovations that prefigured contemporary values education ideas. My close analysis has revealed three levels of discourse in Banks' writing and the Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Education needs to be read with these three levels in mind due to her significant contribution to its content. The first concerns her reading in the fields of mysticism and psychology; the second regards the intentionality with which she set out to influence educational thought with mystically based notions, and the third is her attempt to frame her intentions and influential reading into Christian Education. In order to grasp the interplay of these three discourses it is necessary to appreciate the conditions of her writing. Banks was intentionally engaging with mystical ideas within material conditions in order bring about change in the way religion was taught in schools.

The writing of the Religious Instruction Syllabus in 1944 took place during Jan Smuts' second term as Prime Minister. The Second World War was drawing to a close. Afrikaner Nationalism was becoming a more cohesive resistant force to the United Party. In terms of education, Afrikaner nationalists were resistant to Smuts' continuing policy of Anglicization initiated by Milner, including education since the defeat of the Boers in 1902 (Kallaway 2002: 14). In addition, the end of the Second World War saw a massive increase in industrialization and urbanization in South Africa, which brought large numbers of black and white workers into the economy. The resultant politics, under the guidance of Jan Hofmeyr, was more open than it had been for the past decades, allowing for more political, social and economic freedoms (2002: 13). In four years' time, however, the National

Party would become the nation's ruling party and institute Christian National Education, which championed Boer history, Afrikaner religion, political and economic interest.

In 1944 the South Africa education system still had strong ties to English education and the Agreed Cape Syllabus was implemented in the same year as the 1944 Education Act in England and Wales. Section 28 of the Act stipulated that county authorities needed to agree on the content of religious instruction and that no central authority could dictate to local authorities on its agreed syllabus. The English Agreed Syllabus could not be denominational but the implied assumption was that religious education should 'nurture children in Christian religious culture and values' (Jackson 1999: 89). Its only central dictate was that every school day began with collective worship (Section 25). The Agreed Cape Syllabus, although not as democratically motivated, was also an agreed syllabus in that church bodies had to give their assent to it.

Robert Jackson (in Chidester *et al.* 1999) outlines the development of Religious Education in Britain following the 1944 Education Act leading up to the 1988 law which stipulated the Religious education should be 'non-indoctrinatory and should cover Christianity and the other religions practiced in Great Britain' (1999: 89). But in the 1940s and 1950s, religious education in Britain was predominated by Biblical Studies (Jackson 1999: 89). The Agreed Cape Syllabus for Religious Instruction followed the same emphases of Christian values education derived from Biblical Studies. However the Agreed Cape Syllabus displays evidence of certain nascent insights into values-based education. This approach is being explored in contemporary curricula, where students are encouraged to develop their own values and religious understanding and extend their religious values into the social context (Jackson 1999: 96 & du Toit 1998; 69). This trajectory of values education is later expressed in 'The national policy on religion and education' (2003) in South Africa, which embeds the Constitution's values of citizenship, human rights, equality, freedom from discrimination, freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion in the education system where all religions and beliefs should be honoured within the democratic environment (Juta's Statutes Editors 2009: 289).

Banks' Influence on the Religious Instruction Syllabus (1944)

In contrast to the 1944 Education Act in England and Wales, which stipulated daily formal general worship, the Agreed Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus focused on the 'upward growth of man' and the 'spiritual cultivation of man [sic]' (1947: 7). Using the Bible as an historical narrative, the values, of prayer and meditation as a basis for spiritual faith were emphasized. In Banks' supplementary book to the Religious Instruction syllabus, *Give the living Bible: Notes on the Cape Provincial Syllabus for High Schools*, her suggestions for the content of the Syllabus reveal a clear mystical understanding of the stages of the soul's development. But it is interesting to note in the later Standards the inclusion of existential questions and values despite her homogenous Christian focus. Her intention is to build from a basis of personal development to collective awareness in later standards (1947: 8). A similar developmental model is, coincidentally, used in the current South African Life Orientation Curriculum, which begins with the focus on personal well-being in Learning Outcome 1, proceeds to issues of citizenship in Learning Outcome 2, then finally to responsible engagement with society through a chosen vocation in Learning Outcome Four (Learning Outcome Three provides knowledge, skills and values for physical health which supports all the other Learning Outcomes).

In Standard 7 the focus is on personal prayer and meditation and the insights gleaned from such spiritual activity. Examples of such activity are taken from the Old Testament, for instance – the vastness of the desert firmament, Jacob's ladder dream, Jacob's dream of wrestling with God and Joseph's dream of greatness (Banks 1947: 12).

In Standard 8 students learn about the structure of the kingdom of God from the nuclear to universal perspective: they investigate different contexts ranging from home, neighbour and church to the Kingdom of God (1947: 35-46).

In Standard 9 students are introduced to the rest of the Biblical narrative, with the Pauline letters predominant. A mystical influence is very apparent in Banks' use of terms such as 'boundless consciousness' and 'shrunken consciousness' to describe the unredeemed (1947: 75).

In Standard 10 the Syllabus focuses on thinking about critical issues in society, such as human suffering, sickness, poverty, child welfare, prisoners' rights and rehabilitation, the abolition of slavery and child welfare

(1947: 85-87). There is also a return to the focal point of prayer and meditation in reflecting on these issues (1947: 92-95).

The Agreed Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus is striking for its day in its complete lack of Nationalist content, in contrast to the way religious instruction was utilized under Christian National Education. Banks' connection between spiritual development and engagement in social issues prefigures current values-based education where self-development is prioritized before social development, making her contribution significant. But, as I have already noted, in her essays on education and her curriculum development Banks was unable to extend the notion of 'boundless consciousness' to include other religions or beliefs. The Cape Syllabus she helped write remained fixed in a Christian framework. In the standard 7 syllabus she explicitly states that 'upward spiritual progress is contingent on differentiation against other beliefs. Her use of examples from the Old Testament of warnings against polytheism, idolatry, sorcerers, superstition and human sacrifice' underscores this point (1947: 9).

The recurring contradiction that occurs in Banks' Cape Religious Instruction Syllabus is that while the emphasis is on spiritual growth, the growth of consciousness is undermined by the limited scope of the content in Christian faith. This is similar to her educational writings, where inclusive and holistic education is limited and vitiated by Christian spirituality, which, she maintains must drive the growth of values-based learning.

I question whether Banks was able to achieve her agenda of instituting a mystically-based agenda for Religious Instruction in the Cape, which sought to develop personal spiritual growth together with critical reflection. Unfortunately, the short period of implementation makes it impossible to conjecture about its effectiveness, given that CNE became the authority for curriculum design in 1948.

Banks seems to have had a personal agenda in her educational writing and contribution to curriculum development. When she was unable to implement her ideas, she left South Africa. This view is apparently supported by the fact that when Banks returned to England in the mid-1950s, she developed a social reform education syllabus for prisoners and later helped develop the Institute for Christian Psychic Research, to which she contributed until her death in 1967. In her defence, though, it is evident that her personal journey focused on engaging with issues of social justice from a

mystical standpoint from early adulthood. Her spirituality was governed by independent growth and not through religious structures and authority. The arrival of a strong nationalist agenda in Religious Instruction was anathema to Banks' principles of individual spiritual development and equality for all. Ultimately her life-long struggle with authority, while trying to develop her own spirituality, led her to leave the field of organized religion and education due to the contradictions with her mystical perspective.

Analysis of Banks' Mysticism via William James

As I have mentioned, James' radical empiricism provides a convincing argument for how sense data combine and interrelate to form meaning at the level of experience. His philosophy includes subjective and objective categories of experience and shows how meaning is derived from the interconnectedness between these two modes of experience. In terms of understanding how Banks' mystical beliefs impacted on her educational writing, James' radical empiricism is helpful in that it situates experience, rather than the objective world, as the basis of knowing. In this sense personal mystical knowledge becomes one of the varieties of knowledge along with knowledge of 'things' in the world that interrelate and provide meaning.

A criticism of James' radical empiricism is that it is always in danger of slipping into solipsism in that the object of intention is always a matter of experience or a 'state of mind' (James 2003: 1232)⁶. Banks' inability to shift

⁶ William James did write an essay defending his argument for radical empiricism against the charge of solipsism. The charge maintained that if consciousness pointed to an object (of consciousness) surely that implies transcendence of a state of mind. His defence relied on pragmatism in that he argued that the matter whether it was consciousness, pointing to' implied transcendence or whether it was a momentary foregrounded experience is a matter is matter of verbal dispute. Nevertheless he contends it is not the object of experience but the flow of experience that offers meaning value and not the object of experience itself (James 2003: 123-126). In Banks' mysticism, her mystical and educational experience still remained her own experience and therefore was not completely transferable into the public domain.

from a Christian framework towards an equal acceptance of other religions and beliefs could be construed along these same solipsistic lines – her mysticism was always confined to her interior spirituality and therefore would always struggle to find a voice in the democratic equality of different beliefs and religions.

Nevertheless her mystical experiences enabled her to explore innovative ideas concerning holistic and inclusive education, ideas that are still under discussion in contemporary educational thought. For this reason, her contribution to the progressive educational thought in South Africa is important and deserves notice. Paradoxically, though, her insights into the values concerning holistic and inclusive education were arrived at via spiritual experience, which deepened her religious allegiance to Christianity, albeit to mystical Christianity. The solipsistic element of her mystical experiences ultimately undermined her ability to realize the full reach of what she aimed at in terms of her educational thought. Perhaps, with reference to Virginia Woolf, Frances Banks found her room of her own in mysticism. In doing so she resolved her issues with patriarchy and authoritative structures but that came at a cost to her own educational thinking.

Conclusion

In much the same way as human rights discourse focuses on the recognition of a universal human dignity, based on an abstract measure of equality, and gives expression to values in the South African Education Curriculum, Banks recognizes the need for education to be founded on universal abstractions, namely Goodness, Truth and Beauty and the spiritual need among students to experience these values in their education. The current South African Curriculum, specifically in Life Orientation and Religion Studies, is founded on the Human Rights-based principle of equality within diversity.⁷ Banks

⁷ In the Life Orientation Curriculum equality is taught in terms of the Constitution's Bill of Rights. This is expressed in the human rights education in Learning Outcome 2, for example in the form of gender equality, religion/belief equality and media freedom. The Religion Studies Curriculum is founded on the six Human Rights values that derive from the Constitution; equity, tolerance, diversity, openness and accountability.

sought to move away from a clichéd and formulaic educational lexicon and endeavoured to create her own register, which recognized personal responsibility for choices and challenged students to align their personal values and beliefs with issues of social justice in a similar way followed in the Life Orientation Curriculum Citizenship theme which teaches learners to develop their own mission statement at the FET level. In doing so, her educational thought foreshadows the intention of Religion Studies and Life Orientation in the current South African Curriculum to reflect more accurately the values of thoughtfulness and self-reflexivity needed in a world layered with materialism.

References

- Banks, F 1936. *Conduct and Ability: A Textbook of Psychology from the Hormic and Neogenic Standpoints, with Practical Exercises for Students*. London: Mathuen & Co. LTD.
- Banks, F 1943. *Educating towards a Christian Society*. London: Church Education Publication.
- Banks, F 1946. *People we Like: Nine Broadcast Talks on the Good Life, for Girls and Boys for School and Home Reading*. Cape Town: The Standard Press.
- Banks, F 1947. *Give the Living Bible: Notes on the Cape Provincial Syllabus for High Schools*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller.
- Banks, F 1958. *Teach Them to Live: A Study of Education in English Prisons*. London: Max Parrish.
- Banks, F 1962. *Frontiers of Revelation*. London: Parrish Publishers.
- Chidester, D, J Stonier, J Tobler (eds) 1999. *Diversity as Ethos: Challenges for Interreligious Education*. Cape Town: Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa.
- de Chardin, Teilhard P 1955. *The Phenomenon of Man*. London: Collins, St James's Place.
- Du Toit, CW & JS Krüger 1998. *Multireligious Education in South Africa: Problem and Prospects in a Pluralistic Society*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Greaves, H 1969. *Testimony of Light: An Extraordinary Message of Life after Death*. London: Rider.

- James, W 2003. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Johnson, AN & MW Neagley (eds) 2001. *Educating from the Heart: Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Transforming Education*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Education Publishers Inc.
- Juta's Statutes Editors (eds) 2009. *Schools: Law and Governance: South African Schools Act, National Education Policy Act and Regulations & Related Materials*. Cape Town: Juta, Law.
- Kallaway, P 2002. *The History of Education under Apartheid: 1948-1994*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- National Curriculum Statements – Life Orientation. Available at: <http://www.education.gov.za/Linkclick.aspx?fileticket=JH5xim7T9cw%3d&tabid=4208mid=1216>. (Accessed on 25 February 2013.)
- Nicholson, DHS & AHE Lee 1927. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Roe, S 1990. *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice*. New York & Oxford: St. Martin's Press and OUP.
- Senge, P, N Cambren-McCabe, B Smith, J Dutton & K Kleiner 2000. *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone who Cares about Education Resources*. New York: Crown Business.
- Teresa of Avila 2007. *Interior Castle: The Classic with a Spiritual Commentary by Dennis Billy*. Notre Dame: C.Ss.R. Ave Maria Press, Inc.
- Thomas, G & A Loxley 2007. *Deconstructing Special Education and Constructing Inclusion. 2nd Edition*. Berkshire: McGrawHill and Open University Press.
- Thompson, F 1965. *The Hound of Heaven and Other Poems*. New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company.
- Van Rooyen, M & F Prinsloo 2002. *Outcomes-based Assessment, Facilitated: A Comprehensive Handbook for South Africans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woolf, V [1929] 2013. *A Room of One's Own*. Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company. Reprint as an ebook by Not so Noble Books. Available at: www.radicaleyes.it/notsonoblebooks.

Frances Banks – Mystic and Educator

Garth Mason
Department of Religious Studies and Arabic
University of South Africa
masongj@unisa.ac.za